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Levitas, Ruth, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013, pp.xviii+268.

This book contends that utopia deserves attention as a core sociological concern. There are good arguments to support that contention, and to commend 'the process of imagining ourselves and our world otherwise' (p.xvii). From the discipline's outset sociologists have presented visions of the future in which existing workplace, social class, gender, property and other relations are transformed, sometimes out of all recognition, always conveying the message that there is nothing natural about the status quo. Put another way, there are alternatives to arrangements which familiarity leads us to take as given. For sociology's potential to be realised, sociologists need to exercise their imagination, to think differently.

Of course, the exercise of imagination is not uniquely sociological, and alongside the insightful analysis provided by Levitas of classical sociologists (including Durkheim, Gilman, Wells and Geddes) and contemporary sociologists (such as Boltanski, Gorz and Wright) there is extensive discussion of Bloch's philosophy, Kandinski's art, and Morris's inspirational body of work including his fictional *News from Nowhere*. Indeed, literary and artistic forms with their capacity to free the imagination can make sociological practice appear pedestrian by comparison. What is there in sociology to compare with Morris presenting his audience with the vision of the Houses of Parliament being used in future as a manure store?

Thus the question of method is necessarily broached. Conventional training in sociological methods may act as a brake on the development of alternative visions of the future. It may be constraining through a concern about sociology as an empirical discipline having links to evidence, and being scornful of what Goldthorpe once called 'wishful rather than critical thinking'. In this vein Levitas notes that *News from Nowhere* has been 'criticized for its lack of institutional specificity' (p.114), and for its 'absence of a social machinery of social distribution' (p.201), and Morris is not alone in being subject to such criticism. Secondly, sociological concerns about science and value-neutrality may prompt suspicion of the normative character of utopian thinking which aims to promote a *better* world. Levitas's views on these points are that we should not be unduly concerned if 'utopia outstrips what most of us can imagine as realistic, feasible or achievable' (p.201), and that normativity should be embraced as a route to engagement with debates around and the promotion of 'human happiness and human flourishing' (p.xv). Sociology is critique as well as description and explanation.

This spirit of critique extends to the history of utopian thinking, which has had its excesses, arguably for example when 'belief in the perfectibility of humankind' (p.9) has taken hold. Levitas dissociates utopian thinking from blueprints generated as part of grand narratives of social progress. Standardised solutions to social problems that are imposed in a top-down fashion have given utopia a bad name. Rather, she quotes approvingly Harvey's vision of 'all manner of small-scale experiments around the world' (p.204) that are taking place as people seek alternative forms of conducting economic, political and social life. Thus there is a method to thinking about and pursuing utopia, as the book's title implies, but it is not a conventional sociological method. The imaginary reconstitution of society as a method comprises three modes: archaeological, ontological and architectural. The process of speculating about the future and engaging in informed criticism and debate involves uncovering the visions of future society that are embedded in policies and political

programmes, reconsideration of human capabilities and the understanding of human flourishing, and imagining alternative scenarios as structures that have the potential to be built. These are 'three aspects of the same method' (p.154), each with a chapter devoted to it, informed to a large extent by sociological texts.

By contrast, earlier chapters will take untutored sociologists beyond their comfort zone into discussions of the significance of the colour blue (chapter 2), and of music and utopia (chapter 3). This ordering is unsettling but effective in a book dedicated to promoting possibilities; an important part of that process is reconsideration of what we take for granted. Once that has happened we can, as the book's conclusion expresses it, 'Mourn. Hope. Love. Imagine. Organize.' (p.220).

Graham Crow

University of Edinburgh